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Shawn Davis
Pacific University

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By Shawn Davis, Ph.D.



Introduction

From its inception, the Internet has proved itself fertile ground for the growth of online (virtual) communities. Around 1997, the term *online community* first became common for describing the various communication media that enable individuals to come together online [1]. An online community is a collection of individuals that interact via the Internet rather than through face to face contact for a variety of purposes including social networking [2], professional development [3][4], educational instruction [5], or for a full host of other reasons [6]. Online communities grow and develop around the same set of purposes as do other groups of like-minded individuals who are centralized around a particular interest or goal. Also, these online communities seem to mirror the function, strengths, and limitations often found in traditional interpersonal contact. This article will focus on some of the potential health benefits that are seen through online community participation and present a variety of factors found to be important in the development of successful online communities. To best set the stage, let's begin with a look at a predecessor of online community participation, journaling.

The Health Benefits of Journaling

Keeping a journal of one's thoughts, feelings, and activities represents a long-held tradition. Not only have these recordings helped to provide a framework for future generations to better understand the past, the act of putting one's inner-self on paper has been found to be individually beneficial as well. According to James Pennebaker, a psychologist and researcher at the University of Texas at Austin, evidence is accumulating that supports the idea that journaling can positively impact one's

physical well-being [7]. In particular, Pennebaker finds that active journaling serves to strengthen T-lymphocytes, immune cells within the body. These physical benefits are highlighted in the reduction of asthma symptoms and those of rheumatoid arthritis. The benefits gained through journaling are proposed to be centered on the idea of stress reduction. When an individual makes the effort to write about a stressful or troubling event, they are initiating a series of cognitions that help them come to term with the event and this self-reflective catharsis serves to reduce the impact of the stressor on their physical health.

While the benefits to one's health have been demonstrated through regular journaling, the catharsis gained through reflection and externalizing of the inner self is a rather solitary activity. By extending the act of journaling to an interactive, yet virtual community these health benefits are multiplied.

The Benefit of Online Community

Not only do the benefits of traditional journaling translate well to cyberspace, virtual journaling (e.g., blogging, instant messaging, and discussion boards) within a group of individuals sharing similar thoughts, concerns, or stressors has been found to provide a host of psychological benefits as well [8]. James Baker and Susan Moore, researchers from the Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne Australia, found that individuals who engaged in regular blogging over a two-month period reported having larger friendship networks and felt a greater degree of social support than did a comparison group of individuals who did not blog. This extended social network served to encourage higher levels of confidence in those individuals who blogged regularly in that they felt less isolated and more connected to a community of like-minded individuals that they could rely on for help and support. Furthermore, after two months of activity within the online community, study participants reported feeling less stressed, depressed, and anxious than they did prior to their involvement.

Online Health Communities

These benefits are further highlighted in the aid that such online communities provide those currently suffering from illness [9]. Increasing technological availability and proficiency as well as the growing number of online health communities provides individuals with limited mobility, embarrassing medical conditions, or other restrictive issues informational and emotional support that they desperately need. No longer are these individuals isolated; through online community participation they report feeling more empowered, more equipped in their decision making, less alone, and indicate an improved quality of life.

While the benefits of online health communities have been documented, to be maximally beneficial they need to be more than just an open forum. Beyond cultural and linguistic issues, a number of factors have been identified that, when properly addressed, create an atmosphere in which social interaction, knowledge, and safety operate in unison.

What Makes for a Beneficial Community?

Brennan and Fink discuss the role of social networks to be one that is affirming, supporting, and rewarding good health practices and that serves to provide emotional and social support [10]. This supposition is in line with research findings that suggest that successful support programs involve interactions that provide a combination of affirmation, emotional support, and information [11]. Also, for the benefits of online health communities to flourish, the structure of the site must be easily navigated, welcoming, and the interaction between visitors must be handled in such a way so as to allow members to best evaluate the quality of the information presented therein. To best meet these goals, it has been suggested that the successful design of such a system should be the result of an active collaboration between both clinicians and patients [12]. The active participation of health care providers is seen as

particularly important in combating the spread of misinformation that often results in entirely unmoderated forums.

The fear that misinformation or incomplete information can be spread through online health communities has been the subject of considerable debate [13]. Traditionally, the health care provider has been the guardian of medical knowledge. With the proliferation of online communities centered on a variety of health issues, some have expressed a concern that “a little knowledge can be a bad thing” [14]. Others, however, support the notion that individuals should position themselves as educated consumers of health information presented online [15] and that the myriad health benefits (both physical and psychological) to be gained from online community involvement make such interaction a valuable adjunct to a traditional doctor-patient relationship.

To explore the issue of community moderation, Wise, Hamman, and Thorson observed 62 participants active within either a moderated or unmoderated online community [16]. The study participants, in response to questions related to their online participation, indicated a higher intent to participate within the moderated community. While value is seen in both moderated and unmoderated communities, the structure provided through moderation not only improves the flow of communication, it provides a level of protection in that the information contained within the discussion is more often valid.

In addition to addressing concerns over the value and accuracy of information discussed within the context of online community interaction, research has been conducted on ways to encourage active participation in the online community. This is opposition to a situation in which a few contributing “elders” dominate the online conversation with the majority of others being mere “lurkers” [17]. Online communities have been found most successful when individuals feel that their contributions matter, when the information presented is appropriate, and when control of the group is decentralized [18][19].

The “lurking” or under-contribution problem is a concern for many online communities. Ling, et al applied social psychological theories of social loafing and goal-setting in their examination of various community designs [20]. Individuals participating in a movie recommender community (established for the purpose of the research study) were provided differing explanations for the value of their individual contributions. It was found that individuals contributed more often when they were provided reminders of their uniqueness and when they were presented with challenging goals associated with their contribution.

Furthermore, Lazar and Preece contend that communities demonstrating high levels of sociability are those that possess explicit social policies that support the purpose of the community that are understandable, practicable, and socially acceptable [21]. Sociability, however, is but one part of the equation. Usability, the making of interfaces that are consistent, predictable, and controllable, must work in conjunction with the sociability of interaction for the development and growth of a successful online community.

Conclusion

The act of releasing one’s inner thoughts, concerns, and feelings has been shown to provide a multitude of benefits for the individual both in terms of their physical health and psychological well-being. These benefits are enhanced when one is an active participant within a community of like-minded individuals sharing a similar set of circumstances. As discussed previously, however, such a community must be viewed by the individual as more than a dumping ground of one’s concerns. To be most beneficial, this community must also be a source of information, a means to establish true personal connection, and above all a place of safety within which the individual can be honest, open, and vulnerable.

ENDNOTES

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